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ABSTRACT

In addition to the external pressures for a change in the school year, there are also pressures within the field of education that year-round schools may alleviate. In the 1960's, Prince William County faced the serious problem of rapid population growth, and today the school population continues to increase. In 1970, after considering alternative solutions to the problem, a staff committee recommended adoption of a 45-15 year-round plan. In 1974-75, five elementary schools, two middle schools, one kindergarten center, and one high school serve 7,200 students on a year-round basis. A comprehensive evaluation measuring economic, attitude, and achievement components of the Prince William year-round program was conducted by outside research organizations. Last April, the school board supported the continued study of year-round schools as a viable alternative to space and program needs. In any area where year-round schools have been requested, formal studies will be undertaken first. A plan for community involvement has become an essential element of any educational innovation in our school district. Although there may be economic and social benefits of year-round plans, it is our belief that the educational benefits must outweigh any other reasons. (Author/JG)

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SPEAKER: Dr. Milton L. Snyder, Superintendent, Prince William County Schools, Manassas, Va.

TOPIC: Optional Year-Round Plan in Prince William County, Virginia

PLACE Civic Room KK, Hotel Adolphus

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As you have seen in this review, the length of the school year in the United States has varied from one historical period to another. This latest period of adoption of year-round plans has now lasted for about ten years, and the extent of the movement appears to be as widespread as it was during the 1920's. However, the greater the extent of the adoption of a rescheduled school year, the greater the need to know more about the critical variables involved in the adoption of any year-round plan. This report concerns the implementation of a local program, and it is our hope that our experience may prove beneficial to any educational decision-maker who may be considering the merits of a year-round plan. Although the plan in Prince William has many features unique to its locality, it is a part of this nationwide movement. Because of the number of potential students who might be affected by such a plan, educators must be able to justify such a drastic change in both school attendance and community living patterns.

In 1970, according to the U.S. Bureau of Census figures, there were over fifty-two million students enrolled in elementary and secondary schools in the United States. The effectiveness of the traditional school calendar for this number of students should be of concern to educators. A decision to alter the conventional school attendance pattern may affect the success of these students in adapting to a modern urban society. Therefore, local school boards and administrators need an adequate base of information for making decisions about restructuring the school year and for conceptualizing the variables involved in such a change.

Many of the external pressures for adoption of year-round schools are the result of changes that have occurred in American society over the last two centuries. These changes include the transformation of a predominantly agricultural country into the world's greatest industrial power; the change in the occupational status of a majority of the population from farm work to clerical and technical work; the shift in living patterns from rural to urban; the change in the function of the family; and the increasing importance of education as a major factor in the rise of a complex, technological society.

In addition to these external pressures for a change in the school year, there are also internal pressures within the field of education that year-round schools may help to alleviate. These internal pressures include the overcrowded conditions that exist in many school systems, the lack of adequate financial support, the need to improve the status of the teaching profession, the need to prevent student regression, the need to provide for a more adequate transition of the teenager into the work force, the need for solutions to the long summer recreational problem for urban youth, and the need to improve the instructional program through the implementation of needed changes.

EA 007 136



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In the decade of the 1960's Prince William County faced the serious problem of rapid population growth. It became the fastest growing large county in the country, with a growth increase of 121% between 1960-1970. During the same time period the school system grew even more rapidly with an increase of over 180% in the school age population. In spite of declining enrollments in other districts, Prince William continues to increase, and by next year we anticipate over 42,000 students.

Successful school bond referendums in 1960, 1963, and 1965 provided a building program which was barely adequate for this growth. An unsuccessful bond issue in early 1966 was a serious setback. Even a successful follow-up in 1968 and another in 1970 could not provide sufficient resources to catch up with the influx of students.

To seek solutions for the problem, the School Board appointed a staff committee in the fall of 1970. After considering a number of alternatives, this committee recommended adoption of a year-round school plan. The plan chosen was the 45-15 model with students divided into four attendance groups. Three of the four groups are always in school for 45 days, while a fourth group is always on vacation for a 15 day period. In this manner the schools are utilized for the entire year rather than the more usual 180 days of the year.

During the winter and spring of 1970-71, a number of planning activities were initiated and completed:

- Curriculum and staff development for year-round schools.
- Two elementary schools were air-conditioned.
- The State Department of Education cooperated in identifying and removing legal and state aid reimbursement problems.
- Community and staff information presentations with approximately 215 meetings with some as small as 5 participants and some as large as 250 people with an estimated total of 4,500 persons contacted.
- Hundred of details were arranged including:
  - Staff contracts and schedules
  - Community assignments to specific attendance calendars
  - Determination of bus routes and schedules
  - Middle school students scheduled
  - Supplies and materials ordered early
  - Parent survey results indicating that approximately two-thirds were willing to give the plan a try

On June 28, 1971 three elementary schools and one middle school began operating a year-round plan with 3,792 students. In 1974-75 there are five elementary schools, two middle schools, one kindergarten center, and one high school operating on a year-round basis involving 7,200 students.

A comprehensive evaluation of the Prince William year-round plan was undertaken by outside research organizations and was coordinated and monitored by the College of William and Mary. It contained economic, attitude, and achievement components. The findings in each of these areas are summarized as follows:

° Economy Component - Education Turnkey Systems, Inc., Washington, D.C.

"The analysis indicates that at Godwin Middle School, the only secondary school under 45-15, the overall 71-72 per-pupil cost of education was 9.6% lower than it would have been under a traditional nine-month calendar. The report concludes that substantial savings are obtainable by districts which, like Prince William County, have management teams who are willing and able to make the necessary, though sometimes difficult, decisions involved in an innovative venture such as 45-15."

° Attitude Component - Ned S. Hubbell & Associates, Fort Huron, Michigan

In the year-round area

"An overwhelming majority (82%) of the Dale City parents whose children have been attending school on the 45-15 plan like it. Three-fourths of Dale City's 4th graders and 81% of the 7th graders like the 45-15 plan better than going to school for 2 semester, or think it's about the same. Three-fourths of the instructional staff like working on the 45-15 plan; another 21% would like it with some changes; only 3% do not like it, and 1% aren't sure."

"Nearly two-thirds of the parents polled said their opinion of 45-15 now is the same as when the plan first began, in the summer of 1971. And of those who had changed their mind about it (30%), 88% of them shifted from disliking to liking it as they had more experience with the plan."

"Those who cited disadvantages (61%) named, "other children in family on 2-semester year (22%)" and, "changes family living patterns, vaction (19%)."

Outside the year-round area

"Based on what they have heard about the 45-15 year-round School plan, about half (52%) of the adults throughout the county like the plan.

"Students enrolled in the traditional two-semester school year do not think they would like to go to school on the 45-15 plan."

"Only 20% understood it very well, 45% somewhat, and over a third (35%) did not understand the plan."

"The major disadvantage cited by these respondents was that 45-15 changes family vacations and routines.

"An overwhelming majority (87%) of school employees not on the 45-15 school year would favor that year-round concept if it could be shown that it improved the education of children in Prince William County Schools."

° Achievement Component - University of Virginia, Charlottesville, Virginia

"In summary, this evaluation shows no conclusive advantages for increasing achievement gains of students for either the year-round school or the 9-month school. It does conclude that the things that the teachers and pupils do in the individualized classroom are more important than are the labels for type of school or for organizational pattern. These conclusions are necessarily restricted because of the short duration (less than 4 months) on which the student gains were measured."

In addition to these studies already completed, three other research studies are under way.

° Student achievement -- a longitudinal study of students from the 4th grade in 1970-1971 to the 8th grade in 1974-1975.

° Energy consumption -- a comparison between energy used in the various months of the year over a four-year period with approximately the same number of students in the building each month and a comparison with an almost identical building operating on a nine-month schedule.

° Attendance rates -- a comparison of year-round students with nine-month students on their attendance records.

Our research efforts will continue and we will make every attempt to monitor and audit the results of the year-round program. The more facts we have, the better decisions we feel we can make about the continued progress of this plan.

Initially, the year-round plan was a mandatory one in Prince William. However, the School Board has now moved more toward a position of providing greater options for students in choosing the attendance pattern which they will follow in school. In a statement last April the Board supported the continued study of year-round schools as a viable alternative to space and program needs. In Prince William County the expansion of year-round schools will be dependent upon the readiness of community; staff, student and parents; staff planning; facilities and program needs. In a particular geographical area where year-round schools have been requested, formal studies will be undertaken in an orderly, organized time-framework established by the School Board.

The following planning procedures have been developed and are followed for community involvement on the study of year-round schools:

I. School Board decision on Year-Round School study in a particular geographic area.

II. Information collection and study by Principal and School Planning Council.

III. Staff and parent leadership identified and given time for in-depth study of Year-Round Schools.

IV. Formal study in school community begins.

A. Notice to all parents and interested citizens that Year-Round School will be studied.

B. Information center established in school.

C. Small group meetings of staff, parents, community leaders, representatives of organizations, etc. begin.

D. Large group presentations are held.

E. Notices to be sent to parents on progress of study.

V. Telephone survey on information level (Level of understanding should be 80% or above.)

VI. Follow-up meetings both large and small are held if need exists.

VII. Report to School Board results of study and survey.

IX. School Board makes one of the following decisions:

(1) Implement Year-Round School for a geographic or school area.

(2) Continue the study of a Year-Round School plan.

(3) Drop the study of Year-Round Schools at this time and request the administration to present an alternative plan if the study had been implemented because of space needs.

Thus, a plan for community involvement has become an essential element of any educational innovation in our school district. The optional year-round plan which has evolved provides for student choice in educational programs and in attendance patterns. A specific example of this optional year-round plan is shown at Gar-Field High School which will be discussed in detail next on this program.

Although there may be economic and social advantages to year-round plans, it is our belief that the educational advantages must outweigh any other reasons for changing the school year.

The optional year-round plan was instituted at Gar-Field High School in the belief that more students would benefit educationally by having a larger number of learning options that would be in keeping with their learning styles. Their future will often hinge on making wise choices. We believe that an optional year-round plan helps students gain a firmer foundation in dealing with the choices that adult life requires all of us to make.

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